

**Allusions to the Passion of Christ in William Shakespeare's
*Romeo and Juliet***

Song Cho

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Early in the play Benvolio says, "Put up your swords. You / know not what you do" (1.1.61-62). Naseeb Shaheen compares these lines with two biblical passages that recall the last days of Jesus: Matthew 26: 52 and Luke 23:34 (512). A closer scrutiny of the tragedy suggests that there are other biblical references to the Passion of Christ— particularly from the Gospel of Matthew— that may not have been previously pointed out.¹ The purpose of this note, then, is to simply list a number of passages from the play that may have borrowed biblical language from the passion narrative. All scriptural verses are quoted from the 1599 Geneva Bible and every bolded emphasis is mine.

Matthew 26

1. Juliet: "What if it be a poison which the friar / *Subtly had ministered to have me dead* / Lest in this marriage he should be dishonoured / Because he married me before to Romeo?" (4.3.23-26).

Then assembled together the chief Priests, and the Scribes, and the Elders of the people into the hall of the high Priest called Caiaphas: And consulted together that they might *take Jesus by subtilty, and kill him*. (Matthew 26: 3-4)

2. Romeo: I have a *soul of lead* / So stakes me to the ground I cannot move" (1.4.15-16).

Then said Jesus unto them, *My soul is very heavy*, even unto the death (Matthew 26: 38)

¹ For biblical allusions in *Hamlet* see "Echoes of John the Baptist in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*" (November 2014) and "Further Biblical Allusions to John the Baptist in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*" (June 2015) of this journal.

3. Lady Capulet: “*Do as thou wilt*” (3.5.203)

So he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless, not as I will, *but as thou wilt*. (Matthew 26: 39)

4. Juliet: *How cam’st thou hither*, tell me, and *wherefore*? (2.1.104)

Then Jesus said unto him, Friend, *wherefore art thou come*?
(Matthew 26: 50)

5. Juliet: “It was the nightingale, and not the lark, / That *pierced the fear-full hollow of thine ear*” (3.5.2-3)

And behold, one of them which were with Jesus, stretched out *his* hand, and drew his sword, and struck a servant of the high Priest, and *smote off his ear*.
(Matthew 26: 51)

6. Friar Lawrence: “And weep ye now, seeing she is advanced / Above *the clouds as high as heaven itself*?” (4.4.100-101).

Jesus said to him, ‘Thou hast said it: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man, sitting at the right hand of the power *of God*, and come in *the clouds of the heaven*’.
(Matthew 26: 64).

7. Nurse: “A perilous knock, and it *cried bitterly*” (1.3.56).

Then Peter remembered the words of Jesus, which had said unto him, Before the cock crow thou shalt deny me thrice. So he went out, and *wept bitterly*.
(Matthew 26: 75)

Matthew 27

8. Prince: Romeo slew hi, he slew Mercutio. / Who now the *price of his dear blood* doth owe?”
(3.1.181-182)

And the chief Priests took the silver *pieces*, and said, It is not lawful for us to put them into the treasure, because it is *the price of blood*.
(Matthew 27: 6)

9. Prince: “Capulet, Montague, / See what a *scourge is* laid upon your hate, / That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love” (5.3.290-292).

Thus let he Barabbas loose unto them, and *scourged Jesus*, and delivered him to be crucified.
(Matthew 27: 26)

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10. Romeo: “Is love a tender thing? It is too rough, / Too rude, too boist’rous, and it *pricks like a thorn*” (1.4.25-26).

And platted a *crown of thorns*,
(Matthew 27:29)

11. Juliet: “To move the heavens to smile upon my state, / Which— well thou knowest— *is cross and full of sin*” (4.3.4-5).

And as they came out, they found a man of Cyrene, named Simon: him they *compelled to bear his cross*.

(Matthew 27:32)

12. Tybalt: “I will withdraw, but this intrusion shall, / Now seeming sweet, convert to *bitt’rest gall*” (1.5.90-91).

“There the soldiers gave Jesus some *wine mixed with gall*.”

(Matthew 27:34)

13. Romeo: “By the *hour of nine*” (2.1.214).

“Now from the sixth hour was there darkness over all the land, *unto the ninth hour*.”

(Matthew 27: 45)

14. Friar Laurence: “Is Rosaline, that thou didst love so dear, / *So soon forsaken?*” (2.2.66-67).

“Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is, My God, my God, *why hast thou forsaken me?*”

(Matthew 27:46)

15. Juliet: “Or bid me *go into a new-made grave* / And hide me with a dead man in his tomb” (4.1.84-85).

“So Joseph took the body, and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, And put it *in his new tomb, which he had hewn out in a rock*, and rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulcher, and departed.

(Matthew 27: 59-60)

Matthew 28

16. Nurse: “’Tis since the *earthquake* now eleven years” (1.3.25).

And behold, there was a great *earthquake*: for the Angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it.

(Matthew 28:2)

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17. Juliet: “It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden, / *Too like the lightning* which doth cease to be / ere one can say it lightens” (2.1.160-162).

“And his countenance was *like lightning*,”
(Matthew 28: 3)

18. Juliet: “For thou wilt lie upon the wings of night / *Whiter than new snow* on a raven’s back” (3.2.18-19).

“and *his raiment white as snow*.”
(Matthew 28:3)

19. Romeo: “Call me but love and I’ll be new *baptized*” (2.1.93).

“Go therefore, and teach all nations, *baptizing* them in the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the holy Ghost,”
(Matthew 28: 19)

20. Juliet: “And all my fortunes at thy foot I’ll lay, / And follow thee, my lord, *throughout the world*.”

“Teaching them to observe all things, whatsoever I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, *until the end of the world*, Amen.”
(Matthew 28: 20)

The Nurse’s vivid description of Tybalt’s death is worth considering: “I saw the wound, I saw it with mine eyes, / God save the mark, here on his manly breast— / A piteous corpse, a bloody, piteous corpse— / Pale, pale as ashes, all bedaubed in blood, / All in gore blood; I swooned at the sight” (3.2.52-56). In light of the above, one cannot help but recall another bloody, gory scene of a man crucified on a cross whose last words included: “Father, forgive them: for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34), which are echoed by Benvolio. At the same time the play also brings to mind a central tenet of Christianity, namely that of the resurrection. It is noteworthy that one encounters such words as *Easter* and *Lent* embedded in the tragedy in addition to all the biblical allusions centered on the death and resurrection of Christ.

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Song Cho
Assistant Professor of Spanish
Oklahoma Baptist University
Shawnee
OK 74804
USA
song.cho@okbu.edu